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ABSTRACT

This booklet discusses the importance of family rituals as a way of staying connected to children as they move through adolescence. Family rituals give teens a sense of being part of a family that values its time together. Even something as simple as a family meal together can have great impact on maintaining a bond between parents and children. Another way to keep a family connected is to disconnect occasionally from electronic gadgets, including the television. Storytelling and celebrating cultural heritage are ways to foster a sense of family oneness. Five tips are given for creating family togetherness: (1) setting aside a family night; (2) scheduling regular get-togethers with the extended family; (3) creating unique family memories; (4) playing "remember when..."; and (5) taking time to listen. (Contains 18 references.) (SLD)

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A PARENTING SKILLS SERIES FOR FAMILIES WITH ADOLESCENT CHILDREN

ties that bind

building and maintaining strong parent-child relationships through family traditions and rituals

EDITED BY

DIANE FRANKLIN AND KAREN BANKSTON

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edited by
Diane Franklin
Karen Bankston

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The greatest part of each day, each year, each lifetime
is made up of small, seemingly insignificant moments.
Those moments may be cooking dinner and relaxing on the porch
with your own thoughts after the kids are in bed,
playing catch with a child before dinner,
speaking out against a distasteful joke, driving to the
recycling center with a week's newspapers.
But these are not insignificant,
especially when these moments are models for kids.

BARBARA COLOROSO, *KIDS ARE WORTH IT*

A life-long blessing for children is
to fill them with warm memories of times together.
Happy memories become treasures in the heart
to pull out on the tough days of adulthood.

CHARLOTTE DAVIS KASL, *FINDING JOY*

It's becoming increasingly difficult for families to stay connected these days.

Schedules for both adults and children are loaded. Each morning, parents rush off to their jobs as the kids head for school. Young people fill their after-school hours with everything from sports activities to band practice to trips to the mall. As they reach adolescence, young people begin spending more time with their friends and less time at home with families. Even when they are home, chances are they'll be interacting with one of numerous household gadgets (TVs, video games, computers, and CD players) rather than spending time with other family members.

With so much going on, it may seem nearly impossible for a parent to garner much of a child's time. You may feel that some of the family rituals you cherished are slipping away. Your family eats fewer meals together. Trips to the zoo and park are a thing of the past. Holidays go by in a flash without a sense that you spent any meaningful time with your child.

As Mary Pipher, Ph.D., author of *The Shelter of Each Other,* notes, "When families get too busy, the first things that go are the rituals." What can you do to put those family rituals back into your life, to reclaim your child's attention as he or she treads the challenging waters of adolescence?

ADOLESCENCE: A TIME OF CHANGE

First, you should recognize that adolescence has become complex. A 1995 study by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, "Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century," suggests that young people are being given increased autonomy at precisely the age when

they need adult support and guidance. In an interview with *People Weekly,* Carnegie Council Executive Director Ruby Takanishi notes, "Most people don't realize it, but an adolescent in this age group undergoes as many biological, behavioral, and social changes as does a child during his or her crucial first three years. It's a period of great risk. It's also an age when you can catch kids and get them on the right track before their problems get set in concrete."

In her 1995 article, "Adolescence: Whose Hell Is It?", Virginia Rutter notes that today's adolescents face increasing rates of depression, suicide, substance abuse, delinquency, and early sexual activity. This coincides with a drop in the time they spend with their parents; 13-year-olds spend about half the time with parents than they did before the age of 10. Though peers and social activities take up more of their time, Rutter cites studies that show teens would like to spend more time with adults:

> They want more respect from adults and more cues on how to make it in the adult world. So it's up to parents to seek more contact with their kids (despite the conflict they'll encounter). The mantra of therapists who work with adolescents and their families is 'balance.' Parents have to hold on, but not too tightly. They have to stay involved, even when their kids are ignoring them.

THE DECLINE OF INFORMAL SOCIAL CONTROLS

Victoria Wilson, a social scientist working in California, confirms that the past several decades have brought dramatic changes that make it increasingly difficult for parents to stay close to their kids. When the ties between parents and their children are weakened, society pays the consequences. "If you look at levels of juvenile delinquency from the 1950s to now, there has been an exponential increase," Wilson says.

Wilson attributes the rise in juvenile behavioral problems to a gradual deterioration of informal social controls. "Children used to be more connected to their communities," she explains. "Neighbors knew neighbors. Children often had their extended families living nearby. Today,

we have a more transient society. Parents often go wherever their jobs are, so they don't always have the social connections they once had. Parents have busier schedules, making it harder for them to spend time with their kids. And when kids don't have the attention of their parents, they rely more on their peers."

The middle-school years, particularly sixth and seventh grades, are the times when preteens are most susceptible to influence from their peers, she notes. "It's an accepted behavior to be rejecting of parents during adolescent years."

Pipher makes a similar point in *The Shelter of Each Other:*

> We are a culture that portrays parents as baggage, impossible to ignore but generally a pain in the neck. Teenagers hear that families are a hindrance to individual growth and development, and sadly, teens who love their parents are made to feel odd. This sets up teenagers for trouble. Just when adolescents desperately need their parents' guidance and support, they are culturally conditioned to break away. They must tackle difficult questions about sex, drugs, peers, and chemicals on their own.

Wilson urges parents to work at maintaining the lines of communication with their children — no matter how trying his or her behavior can be. "If you react to your children's negative behavior by yelling without finding out the 'whys' of what they are doing, they'll shut you out," she cautions.

As informal social controls have eroded, they have been replaced by formal control measures. The judicial system is the mechanism that intervenes when young people violate curfew, engage in underage drinking, or vandalize a building with graffiti. It's far more desirable to reestablish informal social controls, Wilson says.

For instance, when your daughter is involved in soccer, basketball, or other sports, she develops relationships with her team members. Many churches sponsor active youth groups. Balance in this instance entails encouraging your child to get involved in an activity that channels her

energy positively while still giving her some time for herself and her family. Wilson also suggests developing a social network with friends and neighbors who can be available to "sit-in" if your child is home alone after school.

RECONNECTING WITH RITUALS

Parents can stay close to their children throughout their adolescence by working to maintain certain family rituals. In his 1997 article "Surviving Adolescence: A Parent's Guide," William J. Doherty recommends:

"Keep your connection rituals. Don't let your kids absent themselves from family dinners, visits to relatives, vacations, and other rituals. Job and school activities will inevitably cut down on these family times, but preserve them as much as possible. Family rituals give teens a sense of being part of a family who values its time together."

Pipher also stresses the need for families to maintain meaningful rituals. "When adults are surveyed about what they remember most fondly from their childhood, most fondly recall time outdoors, holidays, and vacations. So I encourage families to have time outdoors, vacations, and holiday meals," Pipher writes in *The Shelter of Each Other.*

She also encourages families to increase their expressions of affection. "Families often need to be reminded to hug each other, to compliment each other, and to say how they feel about each other. I encourage people to write notes, make short phone calls, do small favors, and express affection in whatever ways it can be received."

Even something as simple as having a family meal together can have a great impact on maintaining a bond with your children. "Preparing a meal together can be a marvelous time for the family to pitch in and have real fun in the kitchen," Dr. Lee Salk writes in *Familyhood: Nurturing the Values that Matter.* He notes that the meal itself can be a time for the family to focus on each

other. "If it were possible to mandate that every family in America have breakfast and dinner together every day, I'm convinced we would see a tremendous change in the quality and process of communication, mutual understanding, and reinforcement of family values."

"Over the years we've always made a point of spending time alone with our kids," and Del is sometimes surprised to see how much her 16-year-old Alex values those moments. Del or Steve still reads to Mikaela every night before she goes to sleep, and often Alex will come in and lie across the bottom of the bed, listening. "He's old enough now that he stays up later than we do on some nights, so our roles are reversed," Del says with a laugh. "Instead of us tucking him in at night, he comes into our room to say good night. He gives us a hug and says, 'I love you'."

"There has to be something major going on for any of us not to be here on Sunday," Del explains. The foursome may spend the day visiting other family members or heading out for a hike or cross-country ski. "It's not unusual, though, if we've had a hectic week to just agree that it would be nice to spend the day at home," she adds. On Sunday evening, parents and children look over the family calendar to "map out who's doing what during the week and what our plans are for the following weekend."

from an interview with parents, Del and Steve,
and their children, Alex 16 and Mikaela 11,

TAKE TIME AWAY FROM TECHNOLOGY

Another way to keep your family connected is to disconnect occasionally from electronic gadgets. Children and adults who excessively watch TV, play video games, or chat on-line distance themselves from their relationships, Pipher contends. "Rapidly our technology is creating a new kind of human being, one who is plugged into machines instead of relationships, one who lives in a virtual reality rather than a family."

Pipher reports that the number of people who say they never spend time with the neighbors has doubled in the last 20 years. Instead, children are more preoccupied with heroes from TV, movies, and sports. "The media forms our new community," says Pipher. "The electronic village is our hometown. ... Parents and children are more likely to recognize Bill Cosby or Jerry Seinfeld than they are their next-door neighbors."

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, in her book *It Takes a Village and Other Lessons Children Teach Us,* also favors taking time away from the electronic world. Her advice: "Just turn the televisions, video games, and VCRs off for an evening, a week, or a regular day each week. ... Imagine what might happen if we all turned off our televisions for an entire week. The quiet and the other activities we could take up might be habit-forming."

TRY STORYTELLING INSTEAD

Once the television has been shut off, you can replace the electronic chatter with words of your own. You may want to find a book that the whole family can enjoy and take turns reading it aloud or take up the practice of storytelling.

"Stories are perhaps the most effective teaching tool ever used," states Bob Baldwin in his article, "The Lost Art of Storytelling." "All of the world's great religions use tales and parables to preserve and transmit beliefs and values. Families can do that, too."

Storytelling can entertain, teach, heal, and transmit traditions and family lore from one generation to the next. You can connect with your child by telling tales from your childhood. While your son might be inclined to tune out a lecture, he's likely to be far more receptive to a story that shows the human side of his parents.

Storytelling is firmly imbedded in the traditions of several cultures. Many Native American tribes have given their young people a sense of their history and heritage via stories passed

down through generations. Storytelling also is an African tradition that began many centuries ago. African storytellers, known as *griots*, have told rich tales that impart many of life's important lessons.

What is the appeal of storytelling? "I think it's the human touch," suggests Fellisco Keeling, president of the Griot Circle in Baltimore. Keeling talks about storytelling in the article "Griots Tell Tales That Teach." "We like to see live performances, and the storyteller tells about history and about how life should be lived without preaching it."

CELEBRATING UNIQUE CULTURES

Celebrating unique cultural heritage and traditions is another ritual that brings families together. An example is Kwanzaa, an African American celebration observed by millions of people worldwide. Founded in 1966, the seven-day observance from Dec. 26 to Jan. 1 is based on the agricultural celebrations of Africa known as the "first fruits of the harvest." It is a time of reaffirming African-American people, their ancestors and culture. Native Americans celebrate their ancestry and culture through pow-wows which incorporate dance and storytelling.

People of many cultures, African American, Asian American, Native American and Hispanic among many, stay connected to their heritage through their extended families. Respecting the wisdom and wishes of their elders has been a means of keeping their heritage alive even as they meet the everyday challenges of living in the modern-day United States.

For families that have scattered across the country, family reunions are a good way to connect multiple generations and keep cultural traditions alive. African Americans, especially, celebrate family ties through reunions; they are more likely to attend family reunions than the general population, reports the article "Getting Together With the Family" in *Black Enterprise* magazine.

Ione D. Vargus, founder of the Family Reunion Institute in Philadelphia, notes in that article that family reunions give people a chance to celebrate their heritage and their kinship, to cherish their elders, and to strengthen their sense of belonging (first to a family and then to a community).

"It's where values are transmitted," Vargus explains. "It provides a sense of identity, a sense of belonging and concern. ... Family reunions spanning the generations help to revive the role of the extended family."

FOSTER A SENSE OF ONENESS

To stay connected, a family must have a sense of oneness, a sense that everyone is "in this thing together." Writing a formal mission statement, as Stephen R. Covey suggests in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families* is a powerful way to accomplish this. A mission statement summarizes the family's goals and philosophy. It might state what family members want to accomplish in their lives and how they will support each other to achieve those accomplishments. Covey notes:

> Many families talk about how, over time, the mission statement has a profound impact on children (particularly when they feel their input is welcome and genuinely affects the direction the family will take). And it has a profound impact on parents as well. With proper involvement in the process of creating a mission statement, you'll find that it will overcome the fear of parenting and of being decisive. You won't fall into the trap of trying to win a popularity contest with your kids. ...With a clear sense of shared vision and values, you can be very demanding when it comes to standards. You can have the courage to hold your children accountable and to let them experience the consequences of their actions. Ironically, you will also become more loving and empathic as you respect the individuality of each child and allow your children to become self-regulating, to make their own decisions within the scope of their experience and wisdom.

Covey also advocates regular time together as a family. "A weekly family night is something that we've had as part of our own family from the very beginning," he reports, noting that one-on-one bonding times are also an excellent way to bring together parents with children and spouses with each other. "One-on-ones with children include private visits, private dates, private teaching moments and private times together in which the full emotional and social dynamic is deepened and there develops a sense of unconditional love, of positive regard and respect that does not change, is never altered."

Friday night is movie night at the Flocca household, "a big down time for everyone." All of the kids stay home to hang out with the family. One might pitch in to help make a home-made pizza, while the others go with Mom or Dad to the video store. "We also have a game night occasionally, maybe on a snowy day," Mary Jo adds. "Everyone helps make dinner, and then the kids get to pick a game we'll all play."

MAKING THE MOST OF THE TIME THEY HAVE

The Evans family could use what many families today are lacking: time. "We're a typical family of the '90s," says Tom, who with his wife, Judy, has two children — Jeannie, 14, and Jason, 11. "We're very time-poor, and as a consequence, we don't have very many rituals in our lives."

Yet, the family still stays connected through the day-to-day events of their lives and through special family traditions such as family vacations, religious observances, and holiday gatherings. Whether it's going shopping, to the movies, to Jason's baseball or basketball games, the Evans family has managed to carve out time in their busy schedules for being together. At least three times a week, the family sits down for an evening meal together. Jason might be inclined to take just a few bites and then rush off to see his favorite TV show, but Jeannie chats with her parents about what's happening in her life.

At 14, Jeannie has been through the growing pains that many adolescent girls experience in middle school. "In the sixth and seventh grade, there were times when she was somewhat

difficult and there was some testing of boundaries," Tom reports, "but now that she's in high school, she's more relaxed and doesn't mind being seen with her parents."

Religion also provides structure in the family's lives. Both Jason and Jeannie are being raised in the Jewish faith, as their mother was. They also are exposed to their father's religion, traveling to the state of Maryland every Christmas to celebrate with his family. Family visits to Maryland — at Christmas time and often during the summer — give the kids a chance to stay in touch with their grandparents as well as their cousins.

As their children grow, Judy reports that they are spending more and more time with their friends. "With Jeannie, it was a gradual progression," she reports. "We didn't suddenly reach a point where we saw a lot less of her." Now, slowly but surely, Jason is becoming more independent, too. Recently, he was allowed to go out of town with a close friend and his father for a weekend. "That's something we probably wouldn't have let him do last year," Judy reports.

Tom and Judy give the kids a lot of autonomy. "Sometimes we 'pull rank,' but for the most part, we let the kids plan their own lives, with the exception of a few areas, such as religious instruction," Tom reports.

Understanding the importance of structure and guidance during the formative years is critical. "We make sure that Jason cleans his room and that both the kids are well-prepared for school," Judy adds. While giving their children direction in the major areas of their lives, however, Tom and Judy don't get after the kids for little infractions of rules. "A lot of parents are forceful about seemingly unimportant things, which I think causes kids to rebel," Judy says. "But we feel that as parents, if you don't sweat the small stuff, you can usually handle the big things."

It is Judy's contention that kids generally live up or down to parental expectations. "If you expect the worst from your kids, that's probably what you'll get," she says, "but if you expect the best, you'll probably get the best."

FIVE TIPS FOR FAMILY TOGETHERNESS

Want to keep your family close? Doris Wild Helmering, a St. Louis psychotherapist whose latest book, *The Seventh Sense,* was released in May 1999 from William Morrow, offers these suggestions.

- Reserve one night a week as family night. Wild Helmering has taken a cue from the Mormon church in suggesting a night reserved strictly for family activities. Activities can range from playing cards or board games to reading a book or telling stories. "For my family, it was always Friday night," she says. "Keep this night sacred, no matter what."

- Schedule regular get-togethers with your extended family. This can be a time for your child to get to know his grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. For instance, Wild Helmering suggests, "Everyone can pitch in to make Sunday dinner. Make it a time for sharing of family and a sharing of community."

- Create unique family memories. For instance, Wild Helmering suggests having a family pajama party. Rent some movies, make some popcorn, and bring in some blankets and pillows for a relaxing, fun evening of family togetherness.

- Play *Remember when. . .?* "This can be a wonderful game," Wild Helmering says. "Just go around the table and have everyone share a favorite memory. Again, it's a way to bring the family together."

- Take the time to listen. "It's my advice that, as a parent rearing children today, that you listen to your children and give them respect," Wild Helmering states. "This is the time for you to listen without prejudice or suggestions. At the same time you must also expect that your children listen to and respect you."

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